

Applications for Using Authentic Materials in the Second Language Classroom

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In recent years there has been a rapid and widespread increase in the use of authentic materials in foreign language teaching. Harmer (1991) defines authentic texts (either written or spoken) as those which are designed for native speakers; they are real texts designed not for language students but for the speakers of the language in question. Nunan (1989) defines authentic materials as material which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching. In this paper I will use Nunan's definition of authentic materials as it applies to videos and songs.

The use of authentic materials is closely associated with the development of the communicative approach to language teaching. Rogers and Medley (1988) provide examples of exercises based on video, audio, and print media materials. They state that videotaped materials offer more clues for comprehension to the students than other materials because of the visual contexts and nonverbal clues. Most students today have grown up with television and are accustomed to gaining knowledge about the world from the television screen as well as from books and newspapers. Therefore, it makes sense to take advantage of videotaped materials to teach foreign languages and to introduce the culture of the people who speak those languages. Using authentic videotaped materials to teach the target language is effective not only in teaching the target language but also in teaching the target culture; thus, using video in the classroom has many advantages if used actively instead of passively.

Because many foreign language learners in the beginning level are not accustomed to the normal-speed conversation of native speakers, authentic materials may present various challenges to students who are accustomed to caretaker speech (aka *foreigner talk*) in the classroom. These challenges include the rapidity of the speech, background noise, and differences in accent. However, it is important for EFL teachers to keep in mind that videotaped materials in the classroom should be used to stimulate rather than to discourage student responses. Activities used in connection with videotaped materials can be utilized to overcome the passive viewing habits students have acquired watching television at home. In this paper, I will discuss the pedagogical features of using authentic materials.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Authentic Materials

Learners who only learn the overly simplified language of non-authentic materials are forever dependent on *simplified* texts. Little, Devitt, and Singleton (1989) state that authentic texts are more likely to have acquisition-promoting content than invented texts because authentic texts focus on content rather than form. However, the disadvantages of authentic materials lean more toward the instructor rather than the learner. Because there are often no support materials with authentic videos, preparing lessons from authentic texts and videos can be more time consuming than EFL-specific materials. Penny Ur (1984) pointed out that without seeing the speaker or speakers it is difficult even for a native listener to follow the listening task. Many authentic listening passages are too long to be conveniently used for teaching. Furthermore, often speakers digress, making use of authentic materials poorly suited for lower levels (Rixon, 1986).

Many sources found the ability level of the student to be an important factor in the choice of materials to be used. When an instructor teaches beginning students the instructor has to spend more time to prepare for the authentic materials. Thus, without sufficient support materials, using authentic materials can add time constraints for the instructor. On the other hand, authentic materials can provide a challenge to students and serve to prepare EFL students for real target language communicative interaction. The challenge of learning from authentic materials may motivate students as they understand more and more of the authentic discourse.

Pronunciation

Videotaped materials give good examples of connected speech and normal-speed conversation by native speakers of English. Second language students, especially at beginning

levels, have difficulty identifying their own speech pronunciation (Ecklund & Wiese, 1981). Some authentic children's programs, such as *Sesame Street*, show native speakers modeling pronunciation. Children's programs are very useful in helping students acquire accurate pronunciation of the target language. For example, many Japanese EFL students have difficulty pronouncing and identifying the difference between [l] and [r] because there is no phonological difference between [l] and [r] in Japanese. By watching and listening to the native speaker's modeling pronunciation in the video, students can understand how [l] and [r] are produced. This helps EFL students to realize the phonological difference between their first and second languages, particularly if the instructor uses videotaped materials to teach how to produce sounds in the target language at an early stage of instruction.

Conversely, non-children's programs present native speakers speaking naturally; others show native speakers' different regional accents, providing students with a range of real world speech. Authentic videotaped materials also make second language students aware of connected speech phenomena such as linking, elision and assimilation (Maxwell, 1997).

TV Commercials

There is widespread disagreement about whether or not foreign language teachers should use authentic materials in a beginning class. Rogers and Medley (1988) state, "the primary concern should be that the level of the complexity of the task be appropriate to the cognitive, affective and linguistic abilities of the students" (p. 472). Beginners in a foreign language have a particularly hard time understanding authentic materials because of the natural speed of the native language. Authentic TV commercials in the target language are especially valuable for EFL learners because they are short and contain a great deal of redundancy. Short, action-oriented commercials can also increase understanding because there is sufficient visual support to the extent that comprehension is possible without the soundtrack.

Many TV commercials are mini-dramas in which meaning is conveyed through body language, facial expressions and other nonverbal clues that students can draw upon to increase their understanding. Ur (1984) suggests using visual materials in a classroom because striking and stimulating visual materials are likely to heighten students' motivation and concentration. Lonergan (1984) also points out that videotaped materials provide visual and paralinguistic clues: proxemics, kinesics, and vocalization. Moreover, Ur points out the importance of environmental clues. Environmental clues are often more likely to provide information about the situation, speakers and general atmosphere than about the actual topic of discourse. Ur explains that an actual conversation between native speakers is usually full of environmental clues that convey the meaning of what is said. However, she adds that most environmental clues depend on nonverbal communication (Ur, 1984). Authentic materials are usually rich in cultural and sociolinguistic content of the target country (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Students also learn the cultural background of the target language when the commercial reflects customs specific to the target culture.

By viewing authentic TV commercials while working on step-by-step activities, beginning foreign language learners can be successful in understanding authentic discourse. Presentation of a commercial can begin by asking students to listen carefully to the commercial without viewing it. Listening provides schema and allows learners to speculate about the context of the program by means of the dialogue and the background noise. After speculating about the context of the commercial, students then watch the commercial with the soundtrack. Once the students find some visual clues about the program, they identify the program's content. After students have watched the program up to three times, the instructor shows a Japanese TV commercial which is about the same topic. Students discuss the sociocultural differences between Japan and the US as portrayed in the TV commercials. Particular images and stereotypes projected in the commercial can also be discussed (Rogers & Medley, 1988).

Popular and Traditional Songs

Music is another way to integrate authentic materials in the foreign language classroom (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Abrate (1983) pointed out five benefits of utilizing popular songs of the target language: 1) holding the attention and interests of students; 2) introducing native and colloquial use of language; 3) presenting cultural phenomena and points of view; 4) providing a

mnemonic device and context for learning; and 5) furnishing an entertaining alternative to textbook study. The activity of singing songs helps the students grow accustomed to the sounds and rhythm of the target language. Songs in the target language are not only useful as a pedagogical tool for beginning language instruction but also as a subject for literary study (Abrate, 1983). Popular and traditional songs of the target language may lower beginning students' affective filters in order to get rid of their frustration and anxiety about using authentic materials. Generally speaking, students show great interest in singing popular and traditional songs of the target language in classroom activities.

Learning about Culture

All of the above mentioned authentic materials reflect culture, particularly video programs. Video programs from the target country provide a rich source of information about the target culture, including a country's verbal and nonverbal ways of communicating. One of the Asia University's Freshman English curriculum goals states, *Students will increase their knowledge and understanding of other cultures* (Morrison & Paullin, 1997, p. 139). To meet this goal, many of the Center for English Language Education Visiting Faculty Members (VFMs) show videos and accompanying materials in their classrooms. VFM Mary Meares has designed and developed a unit to teach intercultural communication in Asia University's Freshman English courses entitled *Intercultural Connections*. This unit includes many authentic materials, including a video compilation created by Meares and Ewing (1996) with various clips showing many styles of greeting people in different countries and in different historical periods. Using this video and Meares' unit, students learn to recognize and experience greetings from different cultures, and to identify examples of culture (Meares & Ewing, 1996).

Conclusion

There are two points which I have mentioned in this paper. First, videotaped materials are effective tools for improving pronunciation of the target language. This type of instruction helps students to realize the phonological differences between their first language and second language and to acquire the target language effectively.

My second point is the argument about whether or not foreign language teachers should use authentic materials in beginning courses. Beginning students are usually frustrated and anxious about using authentic materials. Using audio-visual materials which aid students' comprehension is one way for foreign language teachers to create a nonthreatening environment in the classroom. According to my experience, authentic commercials and popular and traditional songs of the target language are valuable sources of foreign language instruction. In addition, students showed great interests when I implemented authentic videotaped materials in classroom activities.

Ultimately, authentic videotaped materials offer more clues for comprehension than other materials. The dynamic visual contexts of authentic videotaped materials combine verbal communication with nonverbal supports, such as gestures and facial expressions, as well as cultural clues. Using authentic videos and songs in the EFL/ESL classroom includes the benefits of parlaying both verbal communication and intercultural communicative differences. Continued research into the use of authentic materials in the EFL/ESL classroom will hopefully uncover further advantages for both teachers and learners alike.

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